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291616Z Nov 05

UNCLAS BRATISLAVA 000948

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SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: EIGHTEEN PERCENT VOTER TURNOUT IN SLOVAK REGIONAL ELECTIONS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

1. (U) SUMMARY: In Slovakia's November 26 regional elections, center-right governmental parties won the majority of seats in six out of eight regional parliaments; opposition parties Smer and HZDS won in two. Voter turnout -- only 18 percent -- fell below predictions. Ruling coalition parties won 206 seats of the 412 total, while the opposition took 126 seats. The Christian Democratic Party (KDH) with 87 seats (an increase of 52) was far and away the biggest winner, followed by opposition Smer with 70 (an increase of 41), and Prime Minister Dzurinda's SDKU with 64 seats (an increase of 36). Vladimir Meciar's HZDS suffered a crushing defeat in all regions, winning only 48 seats, where before it held 191. The Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) ended up with 58 seats (a decrease of 26), and lost its dominance in the Nitra region due to the ad hoc "Slovak coalition" (KDH, SDKU, HZDS, Smer, SNS) and won only 17 seats (vice its previous 30). SMK's position was weakened in Banska Bystrica and Kosice regions, too. All eight of the regional governorships will have to be contested again in a two person runoff election December 10. Smer and its coalition partners are poised to take 6 of these Zupan positions. END SUMMARY.

HUNGARIAN RANKS WEAKENED

2. (SBU) The Hungarian SMK party lost 26 seats nationwide, and now holds 58. In the Nitra region, where the Hungarian minority makes up 30 percent of the population, SMK was crushed by a strong counter-coalition of Slovak parties, whose only stated goal was to deprive SMK of its majority. SMK interlocutors have been telling us for the past year that Hungarians are disillusioned with the behavior of local politicians and would turn out in lower numbers than in the past. Indeed, SMK voters -- usually loyal to their party -- turned out in similarly poor numbers in other regions, decreasing SMK's ranks in the Banska Bystrica and Kosice regions as well.

3. (SBU) SMK reps were accused of nepotism and non-transparent decisions in the Nitra region prior to the elections, and all their decisions were blocked by Zupan Milan Belica (HZDS). Prior to the election, representatives from HZD, SDKU, SMK and Smer told us Belica was obstructionist and uncooperative both with the regional parliament and the mayors of the region. Nonetheless, he will likely win the second run-off election as ethnic Slovak parties unite to defeat the SMK candidate. SMK, fearing another Belica administration, withdrew their candidate in favor of the third-place finisher, SDKU's Jan Greso, in the hopes of splitting the "Slovak" vote and removing Belica from office.

HZDS CONTINUES TO SELF-DESTRUCT

4. (SBU) HZDS suffered another hard blow and won only 48 seats in regional parliaments, compared to 191 in the past term. Meciar's strategy to isolate Smer and make coalitions with governmental parties further disintegrated the confused HZDS electorate. Meciar still has four candidates in the game for the second run-off, but his attempt to test the coalition potential with center-right parties with an eye to the 2006 parliamentary elections failed badly. HZDS is left without a single seat in the Presov and Bratislava regions, and with only one seat in Kosice. HZDS loyalists blame defectors from the party, who either ran as independents or under the banners of other parties. Meciar was admitted to the hospital in early November with pneumonia, and has not made any statements yet. HZDS deputy chairman Viliam Veteska has reluctantly admitted failure and hinted publicly at the need to reorganize the party. There has not been a specific call for change in the HZDS leadership yet, though the party

decay is evident. Other analysts think that HZDS failed because of its status as a "one man show," focused on consolidating power within the party while losing voters to Smer and SNS.

CENTER RIGHT PARTIES FARE WELL

15. (SBU) The low turnout did not harm the center-right parties (as pollsters had predicted). Before the elections, the SDKU party secretary said the party had given up and "wasn't trying" hard, because it felt that center-right parties were disadvantaged because of their

status as "urban" parties. SDKU's strong performance in Presov region, in particular, was surprising to the party. Oddly enough, KDH was successful in all coalitions in which they paired with opposition Smer. This may portend coalition possibilities after parliamentary elections. Several KDH leaders have told us in recent months that if Smer chairman Robert Fico becomes Prime Minister, it is better to co-govern and preserve the reforms than to go to the opposition and watch the reforms be undone.

NO ROMA ELECTED TO REGIONAL PARLIAMENTS

16. (SBU) Despite a well-financed and thorough campaign by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to develop Roma politicians for regional parliament positions, none of the Roma candidates was successful on election day.

COMMENT: VOTER TURNOUT COULD BE ISSUE NEXT YEAR

17. (SBU) The exceptionally low turnout in regional elections is evident of the poor information and lack of get-out-the-vote campaigns, magnified by an electorate confused by the plethora of "unnatural" -- and often controversial -- coalitions. As a result, most Slovak voters from across the entire political spectrum chose the "I have nobody to vote for" defense and stayed home on a cold and snowy election day. The 18 percent turnout also reflects voter disillusionment over recent political scandals, which were often connected with corruption and rarely resolved.

18. (SBU) COMMENT, Cont'd: The low voter turnout is a clear warning about the unreliability of the Slovak electorate -- a serious matter for parties only 10 months away from national elections. Due to the low turnout and lack of clear party programs, it remains difficult to speculate with any accuracy about the strength of individual parties in the upcoming parliamentary elections. END COMMENT.

A LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

19. (U) The following is a list of leading Zupan candidates who will face each other in run-off elections December 10, along with percentages of the vote each received in the November 26 balloting. The list also includes number of seats in regional parliaments won by the major coalitions and the percentage of voter turnout:

Bratislava region

Zupan:

Vladimir Bajan (Independent but supported by Smer-SF-HZD-KDH), 41 percent
Lubo Roman (SDKU-ANO-SMK-DS-SZS), 31 percent

Parliament:

SDKU-ANO-SMK-DS-SZS (center-right):	27
Smer-SF-HZD(center-left):	11
KDH (Christian Democrats):	6
OKS (Civic-Cons. Party):	2
Independent Forum	2
Independent	2

Voter turnout: 14.45 percent

Trnava region

Zupan:

Jozef Klokner (KDH-SDKU-DS), 33 percent
Jozef Mikus (HZDS-LB-ZSNS-PSNS), 26 percent

Parliament:

KDH-SDKU-DS:	15
SMK:	15
HZDS-LB-ZSNS-SNS:	3
Smer-HZD-SF-ANO:	2
Independent:	5

Voter turnout: 14.5 percent

Nitra region

Zupan:

Milan Belica (HZDS-ZSNS-ASV-KSS-LB-PSNS), 42 percent
Laszlo Szigeti (SMK), 26 percent

Parliament:

KDH-HZDS-SDKU-Smer-SNS: 34
SMK: 17
ANO-HZD-SF: 1

Voter turnout: 27.67 percent

Trencin region

Trencin region

Zupan:

Miroslav Chovanec (Smer-KDH-SNS-HZD-SF), 35 percent
Pavol Sedlacek (HZDS-ANO-PSNS-ZSNS), 28 percent

Parliament:

Smer-KDH-SNS-HZD-SF: 21
HZDS-ANO-PSNS-ZSNS: 20
Independent: 3

Voter turnout: 12.3 percent

Zilina region

Zupan

Juraj Blunar (Smer-SNS-ANO-HZD), 30 percent
Jozef Tarcak (HZDS-PSNS-ZSNS), 29 percent

Parliament:

KDH-SDKU-DS: 31
Smer-SNS-ANO-HZD: 15
HZDS-PSNS-SNS: 5
Independent: 5
OKS: 1

Voter turnout: 15.69 percent

Banska Bystrica region

Zupan:

Milan Murgas (Smer-SNS-HZD-KDH-SZS), 39 percent
Jozef Mikus (SDKU-DS), 21 percent

Parliament:

Smer-SNS-HZD: 18
HZDS-KSS-PSNS-ZSNS: 9
SDKU-KDH-DS: 9
SMK: 8
Independent: 5

Voter turnout: 18.65 percent

Kosice region

Zdenko Trebula (HZD-Smer), 30 percent
Rudolf Bauer (KDH-OKS), 27 percent

Parliament:

KDH-OKS: 13
SMK: 13
Smer-HZD: 12
Independent: 7
SDKU-DS-SZS: 6
ANO: 2
SRS: 2
HZDS: 1
SOS: 1

SRS: QQ2

HZDS: QQ1

SOS: QQ1

Voter turnout: 19.27 percent

Presov region

Zupan:

Peter Chudik (Smer-SNS-HZD), 40 percent
Dusan Hruska (KDH-SDKU-DS), 28 percent

Parliament:

KDH-SDKU-DS: 40
Independent: 12
Smer-SNS-HZD: 9

ANO: 1

Voter turnout: 19.47 percent

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